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Commander of Contras' Southern Front Quits

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MIAMI, March 23—The top commander of U.S.-backed rebels fighting in southern Nicaragua has resigned and withdrawn from the war against the Sandinista government, according to a communique.

Fernando (El Negro) Chamorro, military chief of the rebels, or contras, on the southern front, said in a statement released over the weekend in Costa Rica that he is quitting because the movement is dominated by the "narrow personal interests of an opportunist clique."

Chamorro's complaints echoed those of another top contra, Arturo Jose Cruz, who resigned March 9 over differences with leaders of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), which operates in northern Nicaragua and, with about 10,000

fighters, is by far the largest and strongest contra force. But contras close to Chamorro said he is not leaving as a result of any current political dispute, but because his will to fight was eroded by years of bickering and frustration in the movement.

Chamorro's resignation is not expected to weaken further the already disorganized and struggling southern front, U.S. officials and leaders of the contras said.

"He was only the titular head anyway," said one U.S. official, reached by telephone in Washington. "For the last six months he's been in Miami, out of the loop."

Chamorro was nominally in charge of two allied contra armies, totaling perhaps 1,000 fighters, that fight in the tropical grasslands of southeastern Nicaragua. Jose

Davila, a spokesman for those forces, said in Costa Rica that no other guerrillas have announced they will leave with Chamorro.

Six southern-front commanders issued a communique saying they will continue to fight. The commanders, along with Chamorro, broke in January with the contra umbrella group, the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO), charging that its leaders and the CIA had blocked delivery of any supplies to them from the \$100 million in U.S. aid voted last year.

But the aid began to flow earlier this month, Davila said, so the commanders are in talks to rejoin the overall alliance.

Chamorro, 54, was widely admired among Nicaraguans for his role in efforts to oust the late dictator, Anastasio Somoza.

Contra leader Alfonso Robelo was quoted Saturday as saying Chamorro received about \$50,000 in 1985-86 from funds provided by Lt. Col. Oliver North, the fired national security aide. Chamorro's resignation was already under way when that news broke.

Chamorro, in Miami today, could not be reached for comment. He will be replaced informally by a veteran fighter, whose war name is "Leonel," until a new commander is named, the announcement said.

Another contra leader, FDN President Adolfo Calero, resigned Feb. 16 from the leadership of the UNO umbrella alliance under pressure from Washington. Calero is expected to seek reelection to its board of directors, the top contra body, in coming months.